

Talk of Mandrakes by Gene Wolfe

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THE MONS WERE NOT RUNNING. Peak coughed into his breather and turned aside shivering. What do you do when you *have* to be someplace? And can't get there?

The man beside him pulled car keys from a pocket.

Beg. "You're probably going to work," Peak said. "I wasn't. I was going to Skybase Five."

The owner of the keys turned to look at him. Both were breaking the great unwritten rule of the city: *Do not make eye contact.*

"Here, sir," Peak tried to make it smooth. "Let me show you." His hand slid into his worn raincoat, past jacket and sweater, and unbuttoned his shirt. Slowly enough to let the owner of the keys see that it was not a weapon, he pulled out his wallet and punched the combination. The pass had come by unasked by e-secure and the picture was two years old, but it was still recognizable. "You can hold it if you want, sir. I trust you."

A thousand grumbling commuters swirled around them.

"Admit John Michael Peak, Ph.D." The owner of the keys moved his lips when he read. He skipped Peak's number. "Thursday twenty-eight N eighty only, eleven hundred to thirteen hundred only. Building one-one-four." He looked from the picture to Peak, then back at the picture. "Yeah. that's you all right."

"I'm in xbio," Peak told him. "Doctor Selim wants to see me." He did not add that the mere fact might make his career.

"Okay..." The owner of the keys said.

"You've got a car, sir, and you could take me. Downtown will be gridlocked already, with the mons down."

The owner of the keys nodded slowly at first. "Yeah." A more rapid nod. "I could call in from out there. If they checked on me it'd be on the scan."

"Sure." Peak had struggled to keep his voice normal. It was going to work!

“Naturally I can’t tell the bastards why. Confidential. Come on!”

Together they left the station and rode the speedlator to the street. The car was yellow, and bigger than Peak had expected.

“This Selim,” the owner said as they pulled into traffic, “he was one of them?”

“The only xbiologist they had. They didn’t really expect to find life.”

“You can turn off your breather,” the owner said. “My car’s got ox.”

“Thanks.” Peak closed the valve. “Nice of you.”

“Ram Boardman,” the owner said. He took a hand from the wheel.

Peak shook it. “Mike Peak.”

The wheel motors hummed as they whizzed past the stalled millions headed toward the city. It took twenty minutes to get to the wire; after that it was all clear. Tracking guns picked them up, and the owner slowed as he murmured, “Request egress,” into the dash fone.

“Denied eight one seven H eight one JQ. Special circumstances?”

“We have special circumstances. Gov hicomf. John Michael Peak.”

“Yes, sir. Park space one-oh-eight, sir.”

The owner grinned at Peak. Peak grinned back.

The officer who showed Peak in wore cermet armor and carried a gun, but his expression was deferential behind his visor. He saluted when Peak showed his pass, and waved him through.

Doctor Selim joined him in the lobby half an hour later and actually said, “It’s good of you to come, Doctor Peak.”

“The greatest privilege of my life, sir.”

“And good of you to say so. Get out this way much?”

“You can’t.” Peak shook his head. “Not without a pass.”

“So they tell me.” Selim sighed. He was middle-aged, short, slight, and dark. “Got it now? I want to show you my lab.”

A new guard touched a button, and a light labeled SEC CHECK flashed green. The wall said, “Pleased to see you, Doctor Selim. Is this man with you?”

“Yes, he is.”

A second light shone, this one marked VOC CHECK. The wall opened along an invisible seam. When it had closed behind them, Peak said, “I suppose we’re still being monitored for our own safety, sir?”

“We are, but not by human beings. Not unless the central processor tags the record. So they tell me, and I think it’s the truth. It would take a lot of people to listen to everything we say. I’ve looked for them, and they’re not here.”

Peak made finger motions, waves flying along a wire.

“Too vulnerable. Or anyway I hope so. I’m fifty years out of date, Doctor Peak. Do you realize that?”

“I’m current, Doctor Selim. Just got my Ph.D. With your off-world experience and my knowledge we’d make an unbeatable team.” He hoped it sounded plausible.

“Then tell me, what is it they’re so frightened by?”

“Us.”

“Extraterrestrial biologists?”

“People who don’t work for them. You do, so they’re not afraid of you. I’d like to work for them too—I’d love to, in fact—but I don’t.”

“We’re going to fix that.”

Peak swallowed. It was a hundred strides and more down a wide corridor more modern than anything he had ever seen before he could talk again. “They think we hate them,” he said at last, “and it’s true for a lot of us. A lot of people hate science, any kind. Hate government. Not just ours, any government. They hold science and government responsible for...” His voice trailed off. “For everything,” he finished weakly. “For the way the world is.”

“I’ve seen it,” Selim said. “A little of it at least.”

“In the old days they had buildings downtown. Isn’t that right?”

Selim nodded. “Fifty years here. It was only eighteen for me. Did I tell you?”

“I read it.” Peak swallowed. “If people got angry back then they could demonstrate. Throw rocks, maybe. My granddad did some of that. So they moved everything out into the country and they keep everybody else inside. Now they do things out here, and most people don’t know what they are. I don’t know what you’re doing, Doctor Selim, and I’m dying to find out. And—and work with you on it, if you’ll give me a chance.”

Selim nodded again.

“But whatever it is, that’s one of them.”

“I could tell you another, but the central processor might pick it up. Let’s just say they’re thinking of moving farther away.”

Though tempted to nod, Peak was not sure he understood. “Today I was going to ride the mon to Urban Cee-Cee and try to get a ride from there to keep my appointment with you. I thought with the pass you sent me, one of the people working at Cee-Cee might take me. Only the mons are down, so I got a man named Ram Boardman to drive me. He’d like more than anything to get in here, just for a minute or two, so he could say he’s been inside. I promised I’d try.”

“I assume he’s not involved in extraterrestrial biology?”

“He’s an exec, I think. He’s got an exec car.”

“I’ll tell the guards to admit him later. I doubt that we want him standing around while we talk shop. Have you read my report?”

Peak shook his head. “They haven’t released it yet. Maybe they never will. There was a summary on the news, but I don’t know how good it was.”

They turned a corner, and Selim opened a heavy metal door. “Welcome to my parlor,” he said.

There were lab benches and scansopes, things that looked like plants and things in rectangular temperglass cases that did not look much like animals. Dominating the laboratory was a wall of temperglass; behind it, a small heap of blue-gray matter that scarcely seemed alive.

Selim led Peak toward it. “That is the focus of my collection, the most important specimen I brought back and a form of life more wonderful than anything Earth boasts. Do we begin with it or work up to it? You choose.”

Desperately afraid they would be interrupted, Peak said, “Begin with it, please, Doctor.”

“Good. I will begin by telling you that like many other things you see here it is neither plant nor animal as we understand those categories. Here’s a young one.” Selim pointed toward a plant that resembled an African violet, save that it was black. “It has leaves, as you see, spread areas for the absorption of sunlight. It even puts down roots for such moisture and nourishment as it can obtain from the exhausted soil in which it grows.”

“I see.” Peak rubbed his chin.

“But as it matures and stores enough energy to begin its reproductive cycle, its structure exhibits less and less organization. It now utilizes light only poorly. It is time for it to flower. You must see that for yourself. And for you to see it, it must see you and not see me. That glass is preventing it from seeing either of us. For the present, it perceives by ultraviolet, which is blocked by glass.”

Selim walked to the edge of the temperglass wall and pressed a button. The wall rose swiftly and silently. “Go in, Doctor Peak. You’ll still be able to hear me in there.”

“Is it safe to touch?” Peak asked.

“Perfectly.”

While the wall slid down behind him, he knelt before the blue-gray heap. It was pocked with pores a millimeter or two in diameter; its surface felt like a dry sponge. He said, “I suppose it must conserve water at this stage.”

Selim’s voice came from a speaker in the ceiling. “Exactly. It has lost its root structure and is entirely dependent on the water, carbon, and nitrogen stored in what was once its stem. Now it must hope for a visit from some mobile creature if it is ever to become mobile itself.”

Peak turned to stare at him through the temperglass. “There’s a mobile form?”

“Yes, for the dissemination of seed. Even Earth has them, as you surely know. Tumbleweeds, to give one example of many, discard their roots and roll as they are driven by the wind, dropping seeds as they go. The remarkable thing about this—what shall we call it?”

“*Selimus*, of course,” Peak said.

“In all humility, there will be more than one creature that will bear my name. *Selimus dryas*, perhaps. At any rate, the remarkable thing about this dryad is that it has no fixed mobile form. It imitates, at least to a degree, the form of the first mobile life of sufficient size to approach it. Touch it again where you touched it before.”

Peak did as he was told, and felt human skin. The pores had shrunk, and there were whorls in the skin, like fingerprints.

“As it imitates you more exactly, it perceives you better. Look for the eyes. They should be appearing near the top about now.”

They were brown, too close-set for human eyes, and nearly concealed by their single eyelid. As Peak watched, fascinated, they moved until there was five centimeters of rough brownish skin between them. The flap split, grew lashes of fine, black hair.

“You see, by imitating the mobile form before her, the dryad not only becomes mobile herself, but insures herself from harm. Very few animals attack their own kind. We are one, but the dryad has no way of knowing it, no doubt fortunately.”

Filled with wonder, Peak shook his head. “It’s intelligent?”

“Not at all. Yet it will leave you in doubt about that for a long, long time. It senses your approval or disapproval, you see, and shapes its course accordingly.”

A hand—nearly formless, like a rubber glove painted with nails and knuckles—lifted from the place Peak had touched, growing faster than any mushroom. “The mandrake,” he whispered. “The mandrake’s come at last. Or come back. I’ve never really been sure...”

“That the mandrake was merely the plant we call by that name? Neither have I. The old herbalists said it shrieked when it was dragged, after all; but the man-shaped part was surely the root, so I prefer to talk of dryads. You will recall that dryads, crowned with appropriate leaves, appeared from the trunks of their trees.”

So suddenly it left Peak gasping, the dryad stood. What had been mere lumps were trousered knees; the stubby arms grew longer. The mottled area about the eyes became a jack-o-lantern face.

“You are repelled, Doctor Peak.” Selim’s voice murmured from the speaker. “You see before you a Frankenstein, a golem. It senses your repulsion. Watch this.”

The dryad’s face writhed, seeming almost to shimmer.

“Now it seeks to become more like you to gain your approval. But it is not our doppelganger we hope to meet.”

For a second or two, Peak saw the figure of a man much like himself. Soon its features softened and its hair lengthened. Breasts swelled beneath the threadbare

raincoat it wore.

“Like any animal, she believes your clothes to be part of your self,” Selim continued smoothly. “That’s why the bull charges the matador’s cape, as you probably know. Should you attempt to unbutton that coat, you will find yourself struggling to loosen the bark of a tree.”

The threadbare coat faded, absorbed by the dryad’s skin. Slowly she lifted a slender arm, beckoning.

He said, “You’re not real...”

Her lip moved, opening and closing. A pink tongue moistened her lips.

“You wanted her to do that.” Selim’s voice came from overhead. “She cannot speak, but your seed may provide the final impetus. If so, her spores will spread—or would, if she were released from that chamber—and sprout wherever they find a little moisture in a depleted soil. Go ahead.”

Peak kept his voice firm. “Let me out of here.”

“Do you find her so unpleasant? She will become beautiful for you, become whatever you wish. Isn’t she what we all want? Don’t we speak of falling in love with our disciplines? Of embracing our subjects? I have embraced mine, Doctor Peak, and want more specimens of *Selimus dryas*. New specimens adapted to Earth, an adaptation that will be provided by your genes.”

Clumsy at first, the dryad’s hands toyed with his clothing. It seemed to him that her eyes were full of wonder.

“My presence offends you,” Selim said. “We learned to be less squeamish on the ship, believe me. But I will go. You have an hour.”

Peak watched him put down the microphone, turn, and stride away. The metal door closed behind him with a clang that was faintly audible through the temperglass. Peak could not hear, could only imagine, the click of a bolt.

Her fingers had found what they sought. He struck her and she cowered, but did not let go. In a rushing stream of irrelevant thoughts he found, *never before like this*. Soon he was pouring himself into her, his resolve melting in the primal rut, the overpowering urge to which she seemed as enslaved as he. His hand clasped his waist, drove her loins down upon his own.

Then he felt her tendrils within him, roots as fine as hairs probing and growing. Without the least thought of the mandrake, he screamed as he was dragged—screamed, though there was no one but she to hear him.

The dryad who rose to greet Selim was grossly obese, her thighs swollen, breasts like melons above her bulging belly. A hundred and twenty kilos, Selim decided: two hundred and sixty pounds at least, and perhaps more. “Enough?” he asked.

She shook her head, growing visibly taller.

He pressed a button, raising the temperglass. “You’re integrating the information he carried, I assume.”

She shrugged; and one hand rubbed her belly, which shook at her touch.

“There’s still the man who brought him. I’ll call the gate—the guards should have him there. I’ll make the call, and tell them to get him. But you will have to speak if you want him. I trust you understand. You will have to tell him you’re my secretary. I’ll adjust the fone so that he sees only your face. Tell him—and them—that he’s allowed in here.” Selim hesitated. “Tell him to drive in, to bring his car.”

He thought of Earth as he had seen her since the ship returned, of the festering cities and poisoned oceans, of her enslaved billions.

“Let me speak to Mister Boardman, please.”

In the age to come...

The dryad’s face was twice the size of his. He adjusted the fone to compensate as she bent, a three-meter giantess, to speak into it. For an instant he envied the owner, at whom she smiled.

“Say,” she said. “You’re *cute*!”